

tutes the mystery; it is the revelation of the feminine sacredness; that is, of the mystic unity between life, woman, nature and the divinity.

Frigg, representing the Wyrð view of birth, clearly identified the union of sustenance (rebirthing) of the Tree of Life, the cosmological level of things, with the birthing and life-nurturing of individual human life. It represents, and reminds us, that motherhood is an expression, from within our own species, of a cosmological principle in which the birth of everything is a never-ending process. Medical advances in childbirth are a boon, but the formerly powerful role of Mother Earth, Frigg, reminds us to be aware of the cosmological, spiritual sense of awe and respect, excitement and gratitude at the miracle of birth.

Somehow the welcome advances of scientific medicine at one and the same time allow us to enhance the safety of mother and child at birth, but anaesthetise us to the miracle of the creation of life. In birthing all of creation, Mother Earth identifies childbirth with the deepest expression of all fertile creation, and recognises the spiritual significance of motherhood. Not merely the demanding, exhausting, important but nevertheless prosaic childcaring role, but a significance which can hardly be measured, such is its ubiquity. This is a powerful concept of motherhood. Mother Earth, motherhood, was sacralised in Wyrð culture as being both the basis and the pinnacle of life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Deep Waters: *Consulting the Wells of Wisdom*

— The Sacred Power of Water —

Waterways were familiar territory for many people in ancient Europe, for whom boats and ships comprised one of the most effective forms of transport. Instead of travelling along highways, they went down rivers, across lakes, around the coastal waters for fishing and even across stretches of open ocean. They had plenty of experience of being out on the water, and this is reflected in their literature. One of the surviving fragments of text from our tribal heritage deals with the sea. It is in fact one of a collection of Anglo-Saxon riddles, in which the task was to guess what, or whom, is doing the talking in the riddle. The lines, written in their original form over a thousand years ago, translate as follows:

Sometimes I plunge through the press of waves, surprising men,
delving to the earth, the ocean bed. The waters ferment, sea-horses
foaming . . . The whale-mere roars, fiercely rages, waves beat upon
the shore; stones and sand, seaweed and saltspray, are flung against
the dunes when, wrestling far beneath the waves, I disturb the earth,
the vast depths of the sea . . . Sometimes I swoop to whip up waves,
rouse the water, drive the flint-grey rollers to the shore. Spuming
crests crash against the cliff, dark precipice looming over deep
water; a second tide, a sombre flood, follows the first; together they
fret against the sheer face, the rocky coast. Then the ship is filled
with the yells of sailors . . . Tell me my name . . .¹

The name is Aegir, god of the sea. These lines, oral poetry written down in England in the late 900s AD and rendered into modern English by Kevin Crossley-Holland, portray the sea storming, a personality with attributes, actions, powers, and leave it to us to name it.

This act of water is seen as a force with vitality, an active presence, and a sacred name, rather than an abstract meteorological process merely mapped and tracked objectively on satellites and computer screens. The storming water has a mana, a life force, a power of its own.

In fact, all tribal groups in ancient Europe seem to have recognised rivers and other water sources as powerful beings, sharing their life force as bestowers of life, health, and prosperity, and many of the main sources of rivers in western Europe were dedicated as sanctuaries, remembered in place names, borne out by the large number of consecrated offerings – figures, skulls, precious metals, weapons and domestic objects – that have been recovered from rivers and well sanctuaries.²

Many of the river names are feminine (although not all; the Mississippi is 'Ol' Man River', and the Thames is 'Old Father Thames'), and the names refer to the divinity or spirit presences who represent the mana of that river, as for example the Seine in France named from Sequana, goddess of its source. During 1964, excavations at this source revealed nearly two hundred pieces of wood carving, including many complete figure offerings, which showed that it was in use as a healing centre in the Roman period. The names of divinities of rivers and springs may be counted by the hundred all over Europe, and they seemed to embody specific images of their spirit: 'every spring, every woodland brook, every river in glen or valley, the roaring cataract, and the lake were haunted by divine beings, mainly thought of as beautiful females and associated with the Earth Mother.'³

Our ancestors saw reflected in their waterways not only mirrored images of their physical beings, but also metaphorical images of their psyches; essences of their souls, even, the very grounding of existence, the flowing of life in which they were a mere droplet in an ocean of meaning. Water washed, purified, and connected them with profound forces of life. Waters were sacred.

— Psychic Language of the Waters —

In contrast, today, most of us rarely think consciously about the signi-

ficance of waterways. We know that it is necessary for life, of course, and that without drinking water we could not survive for longer than a few days, and that in some parts of the world, where drought occurs frequently, water is regarded as a precious commodity, obtained with great effort, and eked out sparingly. But in the technologically developed countries of the West we are used to water being piped into our houses, and use it with barely a second thought for drinking, cooking, washing, bathing, showering, flushing waste, cleaning cars, watering lawns, swimming, landscaping and so on. Water fountains spray attractively in our town squares, and fish swim hypnotically in the bubbling water of their tanks as palliatives in the dentist's waiting room. Our everyday encounters with water are intimate and frequent, but not mindful.

The people of ancient Europe, on the other hand, held it in a very different light. Not because water was in short supply, for the climate of ancient Europe included plentiful rainfall, and people lived near to rivers and streams, brooks and springs and naturally formed wells. They had other reasons for specially regarding water. For our ancestors, the people of the Wyrddtime, experienced the boundaries between self and the environment, between people and the rest of the world, as much more permeable than ours.⁴ For us our skin is the dividing line between ourselves and everything else, defining the extent of our presence. Inside our skin resides the private self. Beyond our skin is the other, the not us. But in contrast, our ancestors regarded the external environment as essentially part of them, as a visible manifestation of the world of which they were an immutable participant. Even this is not going far enough. For in a sense the external world of nature was synonymous with their selves. Their skin was what joined them to everything else.

This connectedness was more than physical; it extended into the realm of the psychological, for the elements of the natural world were also the elements of their psyche. And, in remarkable contrast to our individualistic world view, their psyche was part and parcel of the natural world. A flooding river or a storm at sea was something which could devastate life in the material world; they had far fewer technological resources to cope with severe environmental conditions than

we have (although conversely they lived simpler lives and so could return to normal more readily than we can). But apart from this, the very nature of waters, stormy or not, was a way of understanding ourselves. All features of nature were reflections of us, as we were reflections of them. Looking into the swirling waters of a raging river, feeling that immense pulsing of life, was the same thing as looking deep into oneself, into perhaps aspects of ourselves that are normally hidden from view, but lurk there ready to escape on rare occasions, with dramatic results.

Incredibly, even after centuries of science and a hundred years of industrialisation, with its consequent machine images of human functioning, some of these metaphors have remained with us, archaic ways of experiencing our selves as water, in language which has survived for at least a thousand years in our sayings, our folk talk. We say, for example, that we have a stream of consciousness, that we will brook no opposition, and we will pool our resources. Secrets leak out, and we plunge into things new. Or, at least, we dip our toe in the water. A wide-ranging alteration in a point of view is a sea-change. When we see an aesthetically pleasing aspect we drink it in, people are shallow or deep, and you cannot buck the tide. In fact, in dealing with life's issues, it never rains but it pours, and problems come in waves. We fish for a compliment, and throw the baby out with the bath-water. We overflow with emotion, and boil with rage. And, in going to a party, we hope to make a splash!

It did not take me long to construct this list of examples; you can probably think of others. But all these phrases express something of human behaviour and feeling, aspects of our lives, through the image of water. And in understanding those aspects of our lives through these images, we are seeing ourselves as at least metaphorically at one with water.

Why have these watery images survived in our folk-language? Why have they not been expunged in favour of images which derive totally from modern-day technology? I do not believe for a moment that these images live on in our language as a matter of mere accident, as force of habit; simply there because we have not yet got around to ridding ourselves of them. These are ancient images which flow deep

in our unconscious, and which are there to tell us something, if only we could hear it. I believe they are there because they are natural to us; they are a way of reflecting our own natures in the qualities of our biological environment. After all, since our own bodies consist largely of water, it is hardly surprising that these images sometimes serve us better than more mechanistic language. As a scientist, I know that science is often not the right language; empirical concepts are invaluable but not for those aspects of our lives which require more subtlety of expression.

Water seems especially to be the metaphorical medium par excellence of the unconscious: deep images, flowing, receptive, swirling, still and calm, raging and torrential. Our conscious awareness of water is perhaps meant literally to be only 'the tip of the iceberg'; all that below the surface represents the depths of the unconscious.

However, the tide of opinion is changing; let us take a look at the science of water, with the Wyrd perspective in mind, and see what surprises have been landed.

— Healing Waters —

Water ran over the earth, bubbled up in springs, snaked across the countryside in streams and rivers, lay in pools, fell from the sky, formed in dewdrops; all this contained a nurturing energy which was transferrable to people and the land. Running water, especially, had healing power. An early Anglo-Saxon medical manual, in which the remedies and rituals of our ancestors are carefully scribed on to vellum leaves, tells us that to treat 'swellings', we should take a stick carved with healing runes, and throw it over the shoulder or between the thighs 'into running water'. The water carries the rune-stick, which has captured the sickness causing the swellings, back to the sacred source from which all things flow, including, of course, illnesses and swellings.⁵

Another remedy details a healing chant which, rather alarmingly to our anthropocentric ears, can be used with equally good effect for humans or horses! One line instructs us in a shamanic chant, and says, 'Sing this thrice nine times, evening and morning, above a man's head

and in a horse's left ear, in running water, and turn his head against a stream.' The fact of its 'running' was a guarantee of purity. Stagnant pools caused disease; the water was still, it did not run back to the source. The flow of healing waters ranked so highly as a medical cure in ancient Ireland that it was required that any house in which sick people were being treated should have a stream of water running through it. This stream, poured from a bucket across the floor, hustled the evil, the sickness, out of the house and ensured a visible and recognised flow of life force near to the patient.⁶

When I first read these, and other, very ancient remedies, many years ago now, I was charmed by their colourful language. This was a particularly appropriate response, since I then discovered that these remedies were often called 'charms'. Their power lies in their ability to charm, to enchant, to coax from the patient a response to the treatment which transcends the mere physical, and attunes to the powers of healing beyond, in the psyche, and even in the spirit. Water was sacred, and to have it streaming through one's healing room guaranteed that whatever healing force resides in the placebo of psychological procedures would be there in buckets.

Of course, to refer to mind-body healing as placebo is simply to use an umbrella term of disguise; it covers up those many aspects of self-healing which we do not really understand from within the cause-and-effect models underpinning scientific medicine. Mind can influence body in remarkable ways. But I did assume that any healing benefit accruing from the water element of the procedures must be psychological, or even spiritual, rather than from the direct effect of the water itself.

But, remarkably, our assumption that science has somehow defined, labelled and contained the limits of the qualities of water is 'enchantly' turned on its head by the biologist Lyall Watson,⁷ who has pointed out that, in fact, water breaks all the rules of scientific principles. For example, it is more dense when it is in a liquid state than when it is chilled into a solid state of ice. Almost every other substance shrinks in volume and becomes more dense as it cools. Water follows this rule only until it has cooled down as far as 4° Centigrade. Then, Watson says, 'something weird happens.' As cooling continues,

water begins to expand and to get lighter, until at 0° Centigrade, as ice, it has actually gained almost ten per cent in volume, and is less dense than when it was liquid.

Watson then considers the heating of water, and explains that it absorbs heat reluctantly. He gives the example of the all-too-common experience of burning oneself on a pot handle when the water inside that pot was still cool to the touch. Iron heats up, and cools again, nearly ten times as fast as water. But intriguingly, it seems that between the temperatures of 35° and 40° Centigrade, water is 'relaxed' and most easily warmed. And this narrow temperature range, in which water seems to want to respond to heat, to change and volatility, coincides exactly with the usual body temperatures of humans and most other active animals.

I find this fact to be one step beyond interspecies communication. Many of us have had, at some points in our lives, glimpses into the psyche of animals: a surge of empathy with the life space of our pet dog or cat; or, ranging further afield, a flash of insight into the experiential world of a wild animal. But when I read Lyall Watson's analysis of water states, I felt a flash of empathy with water; this ubiquitous liquid which has a natural 'body temperature' similar to our own, a shared level of optimal functioning, at least in terms of rate of heat transfer.

Lyall Watson concludes that far from being merely the pragmatically useful liquid with which we are familiar, the above-detailed characteristics of water, especially its sensitivity around normal body temperature, make it an ideal 'go-between'. He says that it renders water the supreme 'point of contact between ourselves and the cosmos. Something tantamount almost to a separate sense organ.' This summation by a contemporary scientist sounds very like the attitude to water of our ancestors, who were conscious of, attuned to and named its presence as a life force and medium of healing. I now turn to the source of water which carried particular significance for the people of ancient Europe: the well, for it went deep into the sacred Lowerworld.

— Honouring the Well —

In late May, the roadside banks and hedgerows in Cornwall are

crammed with little flowers, glorious gentle colours coaxed from their hiding places by the warm sun in this most south-western tip of Britain. It was a warm day as Sue Bleakley, an artist who lives in Cornwall, drove me through this idyllic landscape heading for Sancreed Well, an ancient sacred site signposted off a narrow country lane near Penzance.

Walking down a well-trodden path, worn hard over the centuries by people who had come to this famous sacred site for personal meditation and spiritual blessing, the first thing we saw was not the well itself, but the thorn trees which stand next to it, their branches heavy with gorgeous blossom. And hanging from the branches were scores of coloured ribbons, rags, pieces of material, tied and knotted into place by streams of visitors over the previous months, or even years. The effect was stunning; quite eerie, in a way, for the rags were silent symbols, amulets, marks of significance for hundreds of strangers, people who had been at the site and had left this offering as an enduring connection with the spirit of the well. At least some of them had: undoubtedly a few of the emblems, in these secular times, were of the order of 'Kilroy was here'!

Old wells all over the country, all over the world, in fact, are sometimes accompanied by guardian trees fluttering with hundreds of rags floating from their branches.⁸ In Britain the trees are often thorns, but also old 'blasted oaks', beech trees and others. The banners at Sancreed, drifting gently in the wind, were of all kinds and descriptions, small and large, some faded with exposure to the weather, a few very tattered and breaking up with age, many quite new, as people visit the well in the spring and summer in greater numbers than in the winter months.

The entrance to the well was a low stone archway cut into a large mound formed of earth covered with turf. The interior of the entrance glowed with soft, slanting sunlight and inside, stone steps descended steeply into relative darkness. Stepping carefully down the worn steps, I saw that the interior of the well was lined with stones, and formed an arched ceiling above. The walls glistening with beads of moisture, and at the bottom of the steps the water sat clear as crystal, as it had for centuries.

As I reached the bottom step, the outside world seemed to disappear, and I was cocooned in a timeless space. I crouched by the water, gazing into its depths, and slipped into reflection, literally and figuratively. It was so quiet in the well, so peaceful, so conducive to the floating of images in the mind, to plumbing the depths of one's thoughts, fears, and wishes. I felt protected in its cool, sparkling, softly lit embrace. I made my wish, and dipped my piece of cloth in the water, sending ripples shimmering across the surface. Afterwards, I knotted my cloth to a branch of the tree. I hope it is still there.

There are literally thousands of sacred wells still extant all over Europe; when Francis Jones studied those in Wales he identified twelve hundred in that small country alone.⁹ Some of the wells show just how ancient are the rituals and ceremonies. At the thermal springs of Vicarello offerings have been found which date back to the Stone Age, continue through the Bronze Age, thrive in the days of Roman civilisation, and survive into modern times. One well of Celtic tribal origin was discovered in 1876 at the Roman fort of Brocolitia (Carrawburgh) on Hadrian's Wall, in the north of England. The well was dedicated to Coventia, almost certainly a local goddess adopted by the Romans. Over fourteen thousand coins, together with other offerings such as glass, pottery, and bronze figures, dating from pre-Roman times up to the fourth century AD, were found in the well, as were twenty-four altars, possibly hidden there when the shrine was attacked.¹⁰

These days, the sacred wells all over Europe are visited by many people each year. They come for a variety of reasons. Some visit just for the aesthetic pleasure, especially for city dwellers, of visiting natural landscapes; well sites are elements of the landscape which invite participation, literally an entrance into the landscape rather than merely observing, taking in the sights. There is also, for some, the sense of connecting with the old, with environment that has not been engineered anonymously to serve a pragmatic and temporary function, but instead a natural feature of the landscape which has been preserved, and into which thousands of people over many centuries have poured their hopes and dreams from the wells of their own imagination. And these days there are increasing numbers of visitors

who come specifically for a sacred purpose, with meditative intent, to touch the deep underlying streams of life, waters that help us transcend the psychological and nourish us spiritually.

Celebration of the life force inherent in the waters of the well was recognised early by the Christian authorities, who were concerned to wrest spiritual control of such important sacred rituals from the indigenous shamans, and instead to invest the life force in the power of the Christian God and in their own intervention as His earthly representatives. They therefore caused laws to be enacted which made spiritual activity at wells unlawful, not allowing them to be used for the performance of cures until they had been blessed by the bishop and placed under the auspices of a saint: the twenty-sixth canon of Anselm, written in 1102, says: 'let no one attribute reverence or sanctity to a fountain, without the bishop's authority.'

So the power of the well was not denied, rather the connection with that power was appropriated, and the wells were changed in name to associate each of them with an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic saint. As in many other areas, the Church found that it had to accommodate indigenous spiritual practices and allow them to continue while claiming that they fell under the guise of Christianity. Many wells still bear the names of saints, and today, one and a half thousand years later, the belief in the health-giving life force of sacred wells persists, as for example at Lourdes in France, now under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church.

At some well sites, more people walk past the adjacent church, along the little track which arcs into the field, towards the well than actually go into the church itself. In spiritual matters, these things come full circle.

— Keepers of the Well of Wyrð —

Wells, or natural springs, are formed by underground water trapped between two layers of impervious rock being forced up out of the ground by the build-up of pressure and released through a gap in the top layer of rock. Such a point of escape can occur naturally, or be engineered by digging or drilling a releasing shaft through the rock.

And yet these explainable water phenomena were accorded special status among the tribespeople of ancient Europe. Our denigration, or at least patronising, of indigenous people, only recently recognised and now undergoing rapid revision, has extended also to our own tribal ancestors, and in this vein it has been suggested that the ritual significance of wells was due to the ignorance of early Europeans about the laws of nature, and their simple wonder at the sight of water flowing 'miraculously' from the ground.

There is probably an element of truth in this; after all, we should not overcompensate for our cultural ignorance by romanticising our ancestors and according them engineering sophistication which they may not have possessed. Nevertheless, it seems to me to miss the main point completely. As we have seen, the tribespeople of ancient Europe regarded rivers, streams, and lakes with sanctity too. So it was not the wide-eyed marvelling at the appearance of a spring which directed such sacred thoughts, but rather the sense of connection with a realm more encompassing, transcending and imaginative than any that we may admit into our more secular lives today. Waters were, for the people of Wyrðtime, flowing from the very source of spiritual life.

In Wyrð creation mythology the original state of the cosmos was defined by two mighty regions of force, universes of energy, polarities opposing one another. One region was composed of fire, the other of ice. Between the two was a region of empty space, of nothingness. Then these two great polarities seeped into each other's territory, crackled together in the space, and exploded. The ice hissed, the fire spat, and between them they created a mist, a seething, swirling mist of potent liquid which filled three wells of wisdom, one of which was called the Well of Wyrð.¹¹

The people of ancient Europe thought of the water in the Well of Wyrð as a spiritual force, a vital energy which permeated all aspects of the cosmos. Sturluson says that the water in the well 'is so holy that all things which dip into the well become white as the film which lies within the shell of an egg.'¹² The cosmology of Wyrð also featured, above the well, a central, unifying image: that of an enormous tree which was so high that it reached to the heavens, and with roots so deep that no one knew for sure where they ended. This World Tree

formed an unimaginably vast organic map for the realms of the spirit, encompassing the upper worlds of the gods, middle worlds of people, and underworld of wisdom within the corresponding parts of the tree: upper branches, lower branches and roots.

And there, at the beginning, in the midst of this mythological narrative of creation, were the Wyrd Sisters, three all-powerful women symbolising the complexity and power of women's ways of wisdom. Stretching back at least six thousand years, all across ancient Europe, are references to these three Sisters of Wyrd, Daughters of the Night. In different tribal traditions they were variously called the Wyrd Sisters, the Nornir, the Parcae and the Moirai.¹³

The three sisters dwelled directly beneath one of the three massive roots of the World Tree in a cave by the side of the Well of Wyrd, a pool of great wisdom. And every night, under the glow of the moon, the sisters took water from the pool and, mixing it with clay from the banks, pasted the World Tree's root to keep it moist. Their splashing and sprinkling fell all the way to Middle Earth, and sparkled as dewdrops in the early morning mist. Snorri Sturluson describes it this way:

there stands an Ash
called Yggdrasil, I know,
a soaring tree with
white clay sprinkled;
dews drip from it
and fall into the dales:
it stands ever green
by the spring of Wyrd.¹⁴

Through this nightly task the three sisters are the nurturers of creation. The water in the Well of Wyrd comes from the beginning of time. The Wyrd Sisters nourished the World Tree with this water and thus sustained the sacred vision, the whole edifice of Yggdrasil. And it is this image, this vision of how the world was created in spiritual terms which leads to the special significance of deep, flowing waters. For emanations of water on the surface of Middle Earth were from the source, from the elements which nourish the sacred Tree of Life, the Well of the Wyrd Sisters. For this reason our ancestors regarded wells

as sacred, because they represented in Middle Earth the great Well of Wyrd.

— The Voice of the Water —

Well waters flowed from the Well of Wyrd; they therefore were ideal sites for sanctuary, for meditations, celebrations, and blessings. Each well was considered unique, and had its own presence, its own way of linking the mundane world of psyche with the sacred world of spirit. Wells joined us to the Otherworld. And one aspect of this connection was that wells could help us to foresee events, to be 'far-seers', to gain a glimpse into the future.

The wells were oracles, answering whatever question the seeker held in mind, through a number of signs. The manner in which the water flowed from the well, or the height of the water level in the well, whether bubbles appeared on the surface of the water when an offering was dropped into the well, whether articles dropped in sank or floated: all these clues formed the nature of the well's response, and provided answers to the questions being posed.

In the earliest times the questions were posed and answers interpreted by the shamans and seers of the tribes. For example, in one of the ancient tribal stories, a man called Loddafair declares: 'I've stood and stared into the Well of Wyrd, stared in silence, wondered and pondered. For a long while I listened at the door of the High One's hall. This is what I heard.' He then goes on to make prophecies for the people assembled through second sight, or shamanic seeing, and in his sacred reading of the well, Loddafair has explained that the staring into the water, the wondering and pondering, enabled him to listen at the 'door of the High One's hall'; in other words, to eavesdrop on Odin, god of the shamans. So the crystal-clear waters of this well served rather like the crystal ball of later legend.¹⁵

We can understand today how meditation on a problem or question can be refocused by a psychological projection: the use of signals from the water, as from any such device like a pendulum or cards, to trigger a decision from deep inside oneself. But recently a German engineer called Theodor Schwenk has opened up a myriad of further

possibilities by his studies of the communicative properties of water; possibilities that help us to understand more deeply our ancestors' regard for the waters.¹⁶

Schwenk suggests that water's sensitivity may be as great as that of the human ear. 'A gentle breeze blowing over the surface of water immediately creases it into the tiniest capillary waves . . . Water may be even more "impressed" by a stone thrown into it, and it passes this impression on rhythmically to its whole mass. The great rhythms of the tides are a response to forces which work in the interplay of Earth and cosmos . . . and from which, through its greater impressionability, the element of water is a receptive "sense organ".'

Schwenk goes on to describe water as 'the impressionable medium par excellence'. He sees its boundary surfaces as receptors, made especially sensitive by the presence there of complex wave patterns that turn them into structures with some of the properties of living membranes.

To document the extreme sensitivity of water to signals that we do not recognise through our human sense organs, Schwenk prepared a number of identical bottles of water and had them shaken mechanically every fifteen minutes in the time leading up to, during, and immediately after a total eclipse of the sun. When the eclipse was over, he introduced a fixed number of wheat grains into each bottle and allowed them to germinate without any further disturbance. The blades of wheat in water shaken at the time of the eclipse grew much more slowly than those in water agitated before or after the event. Somehow the water had been sensitive to this environmental factor, and had translated it into its ability to transmit 'growing force' to the wheat grains.

Biologist Lyall Watson points out that water commonly exists simultaneously in all three forms – ice, liquid, and mist – around a single winter lake or pool (or well), and that since water can transmute between the three states readily as a result of tiny variations in environmental conditions, such a system must, as a result, be tremendously sensitive, capable of responding to changes in the environment and perhaps even of recording such changes as patterns of information.

Similarly, Theodor Schwenk concluded that 'a stream, bubbling

mainly over stones, forms countless inner surfaces and tiny vortices, which are all sense organs open to the cosmos', and that the 'impressions' so received it passes on to plants, animals and people.

So contemporary scientific research reminds us that there is a lot that we do not yet understand, and that we should keep an open mind about the sensitivity and communicative qualities of water. The seers and shamans of ancient Europe understood the language of deep waters without needing the confirmation of science.

— Women, Water, Wells —

The peoples of ancient Europe consulted wells for guidance on matters of personal importance. Particular wells were sometimes reserved for the exclusive use of women, or of men, because there were certain kinds of knowledge held within the depths of the waters which were for that gender only. One such example which survived until recently is on the Aran Island off the west coast of Ireland, where women prayed for children at St Eaney's Well, while men visited another well not far away.¹⁷

Wells which were for consulting by both men and women were often under the control of women. For example, in one account of a sick man attending a well for healing, he

perambulated the well three times *deiseil* or sun-wise, taking care not to utter a word. Then he knelt at the well and prayed to the divinity for his healing . . . then he drank of the waters, bathed in them, or laved his limbs or sores, probably attended by the priestess of the well. Having paid her dues, he made an offering to the divinity of the well . . . and affixed the bandage or part of his clothing to the well or a tree near by, that through it he might be in continuous rapport with the healing influences.¹⁸

But more often the powers of the well were reserved for women, and the rituals served feminine knowledge rather than masculine. Women were more closely identified with wells than men even for pragmatic purposes. In many traditional societies, the physical retrieval of fresh water from the well – a daily routine – was usually done by women. The modern provision of water through underground pipes has taken

away this daily reminder of the association of women with water; now that it is available with the turn of a tap, it is 'male engineering', technology born of the analytic, scientific culture which provides the water in the home.

Not that I am romanticising the carrying of well water; buckets of water are heavy and carrying them must often have been an act of hardship. Nevertheless, we no longer have a sense of the precious potency of water, pulled from deep within Mother Earth through the threshold of the well and into our life, but instead piped from reservoirs. Water has lost its importance as a metaphor for the energies of life, partly because its origins deep in the Earth are no longer reinforced by daily literal images.

For these were the sorts of images which enchanted the presence of water, so that the wells were not merely sources of liquid for mundane use, but also passageways into the depths of the Great Mystery. By divining at wells, women could tap into deep secrets, matters which concerned them as women, and which were not open to men to discover.

For example, at St Helen's Well, Rudgate, there is a legend that the original spirit of the well used to accept offerings from young girls in the form of pieces of their clothing hung on the nearby tree; obviously an early example of the ritual of cloth ripping and hanging on the Sancreed Well which I visited. In the legend the spirit of St Helen's Well, having received the offering, would then reveal to the girl, in a dream, the identity and image of her future husband. The Church rededicated the well to St Helen about eight hundred years ago, so this story refers to a period at least that old.

A similar legend attaches to Pin Well at Brayton, near Selby. A young girl going to the well for the same purpose would be turned into a fairy-sized being by the spirits of the place. In exchange for pins dropped into the well, to be used by the elves for 'elf-shot' which, as we shall see later, was a cause of particular kinds of illness preparatory to initiation into shamanhood, the spirits agreed to reveal a vision of the girl's 'true love'. The local clergy exorcised the well and rededicated it as the Well of Our Lady.

In addition to those wells which were foretellers of the future lovers

of young women, some wells had the power of conferring fertility. Childbirth was an enormously important aspect of life in tribal culture, and women made pilgrimages to wells, drank or bathed in the waters, wore some clothing dipped in it, implored the spirit of the well, in order to have an easy delivery or abundance of milk for breast-feeding the child. The Bride's Well near Corgarff in Grampian was visited by the bride on the evening before her marriage. She would bathe her feet and upper body in well water to ensure that she would have children, and she placed a little bread and cheese in the well so that they would never go hungry.

The rituals carried out by the women in order to gain the favour of the well continued in some cases right up until recent times: in the late 1860s two men were by chance able secretly to watch a fertility ritual being practised at the sacred well of Melshach in the parish of Kennethmont in Grampian, and this account of the event is by J.M. McPherson:

On the first Sunday of May, a keeper, accompanied by an expert from Aberdeen, set out for the moors to investigate grouse disease then prevalent. From a distance they spied a group of women round the well. With the aid of a field-glass, the men watched their movements. The women, with garments fastened right up under their arms and with hands joined, were dancing in a circle round the well. An aged crone sat in their midst, and dipping a small vessel into the water, kept sprinkling them. They were married women who had proved childless and had come to the well to experience its fertilizing virtues. No doubt words had been repeated, but the two observers were too far off to hear. . . . the remarkable thing is that the custom lingered so late.¹⁹

This was obviously a women's ritual, spied on by men, and I feel slightly intrusive even relating it here; to understand the practices of Wyrd we need to recover as much information as possible, but there are undoubtedly aspects which should be treated with particular respect, and in this case we are bordering on rituals which perhaps to men should remain a mystery.

All over the world, wells have long been associated with women. Mythologist Joseph Campbell suggests that this link of women's mys-

teries with water is essentially a connection between the waters of birth and that of the cosmos; the amniotic fluid is precisely comparable to the water that in many mythologies represents the elementary substance of all things. In early Europe, wells represented secret entrances to the body of the Earth Mother, the Underworld, all leading back to the Well of Wyrd. And because the life force of water came from the Wyrd Sisters it was particularly associated with the mysteries, the powers, the knowledge of women. This connection, this sacred bond between women and water is common to almost all traditional cultures.²⁰

At the 'bottom' of the well are the Three Sisters. All wells had a tree next to them, as a natural world representation of the mysterious Well of Wyrd next to the World Tree. In the poem *Svipdagsmal*, it says that the World Tree, nurtured by the sisters, has the power of women's healing. And that its fruits are to be burned in the fire and given to women in childbirth: 'that what is within may pass out'. This use of the World Tree imagery, the eating of 'burned' fruits to aid childbirth,²¹ are women's ways of knowing.

Frau Holle, in the ancient Germanic tradition reported by the folklorist Grimm, is believed to keep the spirits of unborn children safe at the bottom of the well until needed. And at birth, babies were sprinkled with water from a sacred well in a naming ceremony which is the origin of the baptismal service²² – water which was at source from the Well of Wyrd and therefore blessed by the Wyrd Sisters as they nourish the Tree of Life.

CHAPTER SIX

Weavers of Destiny: *Changing Our Life Patterns*

— Interlace —

In old-fashioned history textbooks, we were presented with an image of the peoples of ancient Europe as appearing rather drab, grubbing around with primitive agricultural tools in dreary peasant garb. We now know this to be an inaccurate stereotype, perhaps echoing the 'Dark Ages' label pinned to this period by historians. On the contrary, our ancestors were often dressed not only in beautifully coloured clothing, rendered into a wide variety of bright shades and deep, soft hues by vegetable dyes, but they also wore jewellery. Their hair, arms, fingers and clothes were decorated with necklaces, brooches, pins, arm and finger rings made with a variety of metals and stones. Circular clasps to fasten cloaks at the neck or on the shoulder were crafted from gold, silver and cheaper versions from bronze. Women wore ornate pins in their hair.¹

The jewellers of those days used well-established methods. For example a Saxon craftsman, for his best work in gold and garnets, first made a base-plate of solid gold. He brazed or soldered gold wires to the base-plate to make a pattern of shallow holes. Into each hole he fitted a piece of gold foil, and then a tiny piece of garnet. The gold foil had a roughened surface which reflected light. This made each tiny stone sparkle brilliantly when light shone upon it. Some of the stone-cutting, and especially the shaping and craft-working of the objects, was magnificent. Everyday jewellery was made as many pieces to the same pattern. Jewellery for the king and other nobles was usually custom-made to unique designs; the finest weapons, shields, helmets and sword hilts of the warriors were often decorated too, and the tribal leaders, warrior classes and wealthy